

Keeping Afloat

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“PROMISE ME you’ll be okay,” I say to Tristan as I lug the last box of stuff into my dorm.

He looks around us at the boxes piled up on the floor. “I’ll be okay. Just don’t expect me to be glad about it.”

I set the box on the bottom bunk of the bunk bed. “You sure this is what you want?”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s a little late now. You’re already moved in.”

“I know, but . . .” I glance around at the cardboard stacks. “I could still move back out.”

“Avery, I’m fine.” Despite his assurances, his left hand travels to rub the scars on his right wrist. They’re fainter now, but they’re still a constant reminder of when I almost lost him.

I frown. “You’re doing it again.”

He drops his hands to his sides. “Stop nagging me.”

I sigh. I don’t mean to nag, especially not on this day when I’m supposed to be staying positive. “Sorry. I know I’m annoying,” I mutter.

"I know why you're stressed, but..." He gestures half-heartedly around him. "This was your dream. To get a degree."

I follow his gaze. The room practically looks like a prison cell, down to the gray cinder block walls and barely-there carpet. The only luxury I have is the yellowed bathroom connecting this room to the one next door. "It doesn't look very dreamlike."

Tristan smirks. "You're so lame."

I step closer. "*You're* my dream now."

He takes a step back. "You can do both."

I freeze in my tracks. "What's wrong?"

He nods toward the door to the hallway. "You said we'd..."

"Oh. Right." I almost forgot about our agreement. We said we'd lay low, at least at first, until I have an idea of what my roommate is like. God knows I don't want to live with a homophobe who might try to snuff me in my sleep.

"You'll still call me, though, right?" Tristan says in a low voice, his pale blue eyes reflecting my tension.

I shrug to appear casual. "Every day. I'll probably come home on weekends, too, if that's cool."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "I'll have to tell my other boy-friends to stay away," he teases in an undertone.

My jaw drops. "Your *other* boyfriends?" I ignore the no-touch zone and jump forward to tickle his waist. He laughs as he holds his hands up to fend me off.

Suddenly, a serious thought crosses my mind. "Please don't get another boyfriend," I say, stopping.

He pauses, his hands still up in the air. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I mean, we'll be spending a lot of time apart this year..." A fresh wave of horrible thoughts comes rushing to my mind. He's always

needed someone to be there for him. What if that someone isn't me?

He lowers his hands and looks away. "You really think I'd...? Jesus."

The door bangs open. We both jump, then quickly step away from each other.

A lanky guy with reddish hair strolls in, carrying an open crate. "Bruh. Those stairs are no joke," he huffs. He stops and looks at us. "I thought this was a double."

"I-it is," I stammer. "I'm Avery. He was just—"

"Leaving," Tristan grumbles.

I gape at him.

My roommate doesn't notice. "Cooper," he introduces himself as he squeezes between us. "That top bunk open?"

"Yeah." I press myself flat against his desk to let him pass. Tristan takes the opportunity to slip toward the door.

"Hey, wait," I say.

Cooper stops with his box in the air.

"Not you," I tell him. "I'll be right back."

I squish past him and follow Tristan out to the hallway. He's already halfway to the stairs, weaving between tons of people with boxes.

"You were just going to abandon me?" I say as I catch up to him.

"We can't talk about this here," Tristan says as he heads down the stairs.

When we reach the first floor, he dips inside a room marked "Laundry." He closes the door behind me, but he doesn't turn on the lights. He marches to the end of the row of washing machines, then whirls around. "Seriously, Avery? You're the one who's living with another person, not me."

I wave my arm back toward the hall. "I just met the guy!"

"Yeah, but you're basically sleeping together."

"On separate bunks."

"In the *same bed*."

"What else am I supposed to do? They force us to have room-mates."

"You could have lived off campus."

"Oh, really? Because my dad could have afforded it, right?"

Tristan stiffens. "You don't need to bring our dads into this."

"I'm only here because I have a scholarship—"

He waves his hands in the air. "I know, I know. Big deal."

I bang the top of a washing machine. "You said you were proud of me."

"Don't fucking change the subject. You think I'm going to *cheat* on you? Of the two of us, you're the one with a history of cheating."

He may as well have punched me in the gut. He's never blamed me for it before, considering he was a guilty party, too. I never thought he would take Ashley's side. "You're bringing *that* up? I cheated on her with *you*."

He crosses his arms and looks away. "Well, once a cheater . . ."

"I broke up with her the next day so I wouldn't *have* to cheat on her."

"You said you had a fight."

"Yeah, over you, because I was in love with you!"

He starts to tremble. "You were?"

"Yes," I breathe. I close the gap between us and cup his face in my hands. "I'm still madly, madly in love with you," I say, guiding his eyes back to mine.

"Christ, Avery," he says shakily.

I pull him into a tight hug. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said it."

"I would never do that to you."

"I wouldn't, either."

He breathes heavily against my shirt. I don't know what the hell I was thinking. He's never been like that, never shown interest in anyone else. It took him forever to even open up to me.

Feeling dumb, I rub his arms and say, "First day of college, yay . . .," in a falsely cheerful voice.

He pulls back to look at me with a weak smirk. "At least you found the laundry room."

"Yes. I'll use it, maybe . . . three times."

He glances at the machine next to us. "You sure you know how?"

"Wash, rinse, spin—"

"You're just reading the label."

I chuckle hollowly. "That's how I learn." I tilt his chin back toward me. "Do you forgive me?"

To my surprise, he kisses me. "Yes," he whispers.

"Good." And I can't help it—I kiss him again. It's a kiss that unravels surprisingly fast. Before I know it, he's leaning me against the machine, taking my breath and my body hostage. I never expected this to happen here. And though I allow it, a part of me wonders if this isn't about forgiveness, or even love. Maybe this is him saying goodbye.

Something loud bangs against the door, wrecking the moment. A high-pitched laugh follows.

"Assholes," I grumble, still out of breath.

"They don't know we're in here."

"Yeah, but they're distracting."

To my dismay, Tristan seems to agree. He releases me but still holds my hand.

I straighten up and wipe my mouth. "You sure you're okay?"

"Stop asking." He swings my hand back and forth. "I should go,

though, before someone comes in.”

“Mm, do you have to? I was having fun,” I say as he slowly tugs me toward the door.

His smile looks real this time. “That post-fight bliss?”

I groan. “God, don’t remind me.”

“We can make up when you go home next.”

“Now I’m *really* coming home next weekend.”

He stops and looks at me. “You are, right?”

“You bet your ass, Chevalier.”

He flushes. “Good.” He lets go of my hand so he can open the door.

“Hey, wait.” I prop my hand against it.

He looks at me over his shoulder.

I slip my arms around his waist. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but take care of yourself, please,” I murmur in his ear. “While I’m gone.”

“You, too.” He covers my arms with his.

I squeeze him tighter. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I sigh and breathe in the scent of his hair. He smells like soap, the very faintest scent of pine. “Okay,” I say as I reluctantly let go of him.

He bites his lip and opens the door. The bright lights and moving people temporarily stun us as we step into the hallway. Tristan hesitates, then walks with purpose toward the exit. I stay and watch, rooted at the bottom of the stairs, as his sandy-blond hair disappears into the sun outside.

Once he’s gone, I climb back up the stairs, my legs feeling like rocks. When I enter my room, Cooper is trying to shove an oversized duffel into the closet.

He looks up at me as I close the door. "Was that your boyfriend?" he asks point-blank.

My hand reflexively clenches into a fist. "Is that a problem?" I say, taking a menacing step toward him.

He raises his palms. "Whoa, bro. Chill. No problem."

I stop and clench my other fist. "You sure?"

"Shit, man. Relax. Here, have this." He reaches in his pocket, then pulls out a small plastic bag and tosses it to me.

I catch it instinctively. "What is it?" I say as I notice a small white pill inside.

"It's a welcome home present. You'll thank me later." He shoves the closet door shut and wipes his forehead. "Whew. Unpacking sucks. I'm gonna go check out the frat house. You wanna join?" He walks past me and jerks his thumb toward the door as if everything's cool.

My head's still spinning from confusion. "The frat house?"

"Yeah, I heard the sorority girls come over and get *lit*. Oh, wait. Never mind." He laughs at himself, then says, "There's a lot of guys, if you wanna find some hung ones. I can hook you up."

"No. Uh..." I look around wildly for an excuse. "I probably need to unpack. Thanks."

He shrugs. "Alright. Next time, then."

He disappears out into the hall and lets the door swing shut behind him.

I feel like I need to sit down. I sit on the edge of my bed and examine the bag closer. Did he just give me drugs and then offer me sex? I knew college was different, but I didn't know it'd be *this* different. And why would he do me any favors after I threatened him?

I mean, what the hell is this stuff, anyway? Could he be trying to

poison me? Get me expelled?

Paranoid now, I get up and open his closet. The duffel is sitting on top of a bunch of random clothes he piled at the bottom. I zip open the side pocket of the bag and stuff the baggie as far as I can into its depths. As I close the closet again, I wonder why I thought it'd be fun to room with a stranger. I guess I thought it'd be like having a built-in best friend.

Tristan, I realize with a sharp pang. Tristan's the one I wanted to room with. He had his own plans, though, and now the weight of our choices is sinking in.

I'm doing this alone.